SPORT

Paz drives Como to thumping win over sorry Lazio

MILAN: Nico Paz starred in Como's thumping 3-0 win at Lazio on Monday as the ambitious lakeside outfit continued their bid for European football.

Argentina international Paz bundled in Como's second goal midway through the first half in Rome before making sure of the win with a beautiful long-range strike three minutes after the break.

The 21-year-old has scored eight times and set up six more this season as Como, owned by tobacco giant Djarum and coached by Cesc Fabregas, have exceeded expectations in just their second top flight season in a quarter of a century.

Como sit sixth and in the Conference League spot with 37 points from 21 games, just two fewer than giants Juventus and five away from the Champions League positions.

Paz, who was bought in August last year from Real Madrid in a complicated deal which gives the Spanish giants the right of repurchase before 2027, would have had a hat-trick had Ivan Provedel not saved his penalty in the 35th minute.

While Como continue to push forward Lazio are fading under Maurizio Sarri who has had to deal with two key players in Matteo Guendouzi and Valentin Castellanos being sold in the January transfer window.

Lazio are nine points behind Como in ninth and were loudly booed off the field by a despondent crowd at a sparsely-populated Stadio Olimpico.—AFP

Mercedes chief designer Owen to leave F1 team

LONDON: Mercedes chief designer John Owen is to leave the Formula One team later this year, it was announced on Tuesday.

Owen, 52, joined the British-based outfit in 2007, when it was Honda, and has been a key figure in championships won under the name Brawn in 2009 and Mercedes from 2010.

Brawn GP clinched both the drivers' and teams' championships in 2009 and the team won seven drivers' and eight constructors' championships as Mercedes from 2014 to 2021.

"We can confirm that John Owen, our director of car design, has decided that now is the right time to take a break from F1 and that he will be leaving the team later this year to begin a period of gardening leave, after assuring the transition to his successor," Mercedes said in a statement.

"John has been with our Brackley team since 2007 and played a considerable role in our success."

Mercedes said Owen's role would be filled by Giacomo Tortora, currently engineering director, while deputy technical director Simone Resta will oversee the group.

Pre-season testing starts in Bahrain next month, ahead of the first Grand Prix of the season in Australia on March 8.—AFP

BRIGHTON and Hove Albion's Charalampos Kostoulas (second R) scores from a bicycle kick against Bournemouth during their Premier League match at The American Express Community Stadium.—Reuters

Kostoulas stunner saves Brighton against Bournemouth

BRIGHTON: Greek teenager Charalampos Kostoulas scored with a superb overhead kick in stoppage time to salvage a point for Brighton & Hove Albion in a 1-1 home draw with Bournemouth in the Premier League on Monday.

It looked as though a controversial first-half penalty by Marcus Tavernier at the Amex Stadium had sealed Bournemouth back-to-back Premier League wins for the first time since August.

But substitute Kostoulas, signed for a reported 32 million pounds ($42.96 million) from Olympiakos last summer, had other ideas as he launched himself into a bicycle kick from Jan Paul van Hecke's knockdown and directed the ball past Djordje Petrovic.

The moment of magic was the 18-year-old's second goal of the season and first since October.

"I've seen him score better in training, but that was unbelievable. He's a special talent," Brighton skipper Lewis Dunk told Sky Sports. "You've seen glimpses, and there'll be many more things to come from him."

Tavernier had put Bournemouth in front from the spot in the 32nd minute after referee Paul Tierney was told to view a VAR replay of an incident in which he initially booked Bournemouth's winger Amine Adli for diving.

But after looking at the pitchside monitor he deemed that goalkeeper Bart Verbruggen had indeed caught Adli with his lifted leg as he tried to intercept a ball into the area.

"It's difficult to speak to the referees. They always have their own opinion," Brighton boss Fabian Hurzeler said of the penalty. "A touch and a contact is not enough, and that is what the referees said to us before the start of the season. And in certain moments they don't do it, that's just the truth, and we've got to accept."

Brighton had started strongly but faded and Bournemouth could have built on their lead with Evanilson hitting the post and heading another chance just wide before halftime.

A tiring Bournemouth dropped deep in the second half but could not see out only their second Premier League away win this season. Brighton stayed in 12th place in the standings with 30 points from 22 games while Bournemouth are 15th with 27.

Bournemouth have now conceded 12 goals in the last 15 minutes of the second half — no team has allowed more in the Premier League this season.

"At the end, we are in that moment in the season when everything is against us," said Bournemouth manager Andoni Iraola, whose side have struggled this season after a flying start.

"We don't have this little bit of luck you need. They scored an incredible goal, an overhead kick, top corner, and you finish with a point. It's a big shame because the players did an incredible effort. They were dead at the end."—Agencies

Morocco achieve record FIFA ranking, Senegal rise to 12th

ZURICH: Morocco have achieved their highest FIFA men's world ranking, rising to eighth, despite losing the Africa Cup of Nations final to Senegal, who climbed to 12th on Monday.

Morocco were beaten 1-0 after extra time by Senegal in the decider in Rabat on Sunday, but the hosts had a chance to win the trophy with a last-gasp penalty at the end of regulation time.

However, Brahim Diaz squandered the kick after having to wait some 14 minutes for the Senegal players to return, as they walked off the field to protest the penalty decision.

Morocco moved up three spots in the January ranking to eighth. The 2022 World Cup semi-finalists' previous best was 10th in April 1998.

The highest ranking achieved by an African team was Nigeria's fifth in April 1994, while Egypt posted the best ranking among Arab nations when they reached ninth in July 2010.

Champions Senegal, who emerged victorious for a second time in the last three editions, moved up seven spots to reach their highest-ever ranking. Their previous best was 17th, achieved in 2024.

The AFCON results have had a huge impact on the ranking of African teams, as several positions have shifted.

Bronze medallists Nigeria (26th) were the team that gained the most points, collecting 79.09 points to move up 12 spots, the same as Cameroon (45th), making them the biggest climbers.

Egypt, who reached the semi-finals of the Africa Cup of Nations, climbed four places to 31st, three spots behind Algeria.

Gabon, who were eliminated in the group stage, lost 44.97 points to become the team that lost the most points, dropping to 86th. Equatorial Guinea, meanwhile, suffered the biggest fall, sliding 10 spots to 107th.

European champions Spain kept top spot, ahead of World Cup holders Argentina. France are third, followed by England, Brazil, Portugal and the Netherlands, with no change in the ranking of the top seven teams.—Reuters

DAKAR: Senegal's Iliman Ndiaye kisses the trophy as he celebrates on the bus with team-mates during the Africa Cup of Nations victory parade on Tuesday. Thousands gathered at the parade's starting point, a working-class neighbourhood called Patte d'Oie, wearing team jerseys, chanting, whistling and blowing vuvuzelas. The Senegal players made their way across the capital after arriving on a special flight from Morocco shortly before midnight on Monday, where they were greeted by President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko and other members of the government. Senegal won the trophy when they beat hosts Morocco 1-0—Reuters

Prime minister urged to ensure free, fair PHF elections

By Kashif Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: A number of prominent former players and National Assembly member Shehla Raza on Tuesday requested Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to intervene in order to ensure free and fair elections of the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF).

Addressing a media conference at the National Press Club in Islamabad, Shehla alongside Pakistan's former stalwarts including Shehnaz Sheikh, Samiullah Khan, Waseem Feroz, Haider Hussain, Shakeel Abbasi, Nasir Ali, Ayaz Mahmood, and Naim Akhtar said that PHF president Tariq Bugti was appointed by the prime minister for scrutinising clubs and holding the elections.

However, the participants of the presser said, instead of holding elections Bugti got himself elected as PHF president.

"Fresh elections should be held without any involvement of Bugti," they insisted. "In this regard all active [hockey] clubs should be given [the] voting right while action should be taken against bogus clubs."

The participants further said that there was a need to appoint an ad hoc set-up for holding the elections.

Pointing out the audit paras against PHF officials, which were still pending, Shehla stated that "those involved in corruption are responsible for the downfall of Pakistan hockey".

Expressing their strong concerns over alarming decline of the national sport, all the former players emphasised that the PM should intervene to properly handle the PHF matters.

"Hockey is the pride of the nation but [unfortunately] corruption and mismanagement have reduced the standard of the game and now Pakistan stands nowhere in the world," they lamented and voiced their concerns over the ongoing scrutiny process of clubs.

"Without genuine scrutiny, free and fair elections can't be held."

It is relevant to note here that the National Assembly Standing Committee some months ago had directed Bugti to hold PHF elections within two months. The committee had also asked the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to complete its inquiry against the game's governing body.

ISLAMABAD: Former hockey Olympians Hanif Khan, Samiullah, Shehnaz Shaikh, Nasir Ali alongside member of National Assembly Shehla Raza (C) attend a press conference on Tuesday.—Tanveer Shahzad/White Star

After hearing all stakeholders including representative of the ministry of law, attorney general office, PHF officials and IPC ministry, the committee directed Bugti to hold the federation's elections in a couple of months.

In the same meeting, FIA officials briefed the committee about the pending inquiry related to over 100 audit paras of the PHF many of which related to alleged corruption.

The former players also claimed that PSB's policy on clubs' scrutiny was still unclear, noting "the PHF is issuing its own notification while the PSB is issuing a separate letter".

PHF CLARIFICATION

Meanwhile, the PHF through an official letter clarified that its letter related to the scrutiny of clubs caused confusion among stakeholders.

"It is hereby clarified that no scrutiny of hockey clubs is being carried out by the PHF independently and any schedule circulated in this regard shall not be acted upon," the letter said.

"The PHF affirms that the process of the scrutiny of clubs shall be conducted strictly in consultation, coordination and under the supervision of the Pakistan Sports Board as already decided," read the PHF letter, which was addressed to PSB director general and all affiliated units.

It further said: "A consolidated and official schedule for the scrutiny of clubs shall be issued jointly by the PSB and the PHF, and [it] will be circulated in advance to all concerned."

Irfan set up national snooker final against Asif

KARACHI: Rana Irfan staged a spectacular recovery from three frames down to defeat former champion Asjad Iqbal 5-4, setting up a title clash with veteran Mohammad Asif in the final of the National Snooker Championship here at the NBP Sports Complex on Tuesday.

In a semi-final of extraordinary shifts in momentum, Irfan was outplayed early as Asjad, the current world cup team champion, took the first three frames, including the third with a break of 54. Facing elimination, Irfan began his fightback by narrowly taking the fourth frame 67-52.

He found his rhythm with a 57 break to win the fifth, but Asjad, who won the national title in 2024, responded with a dominant 95 clearance to move within one frame of victory at 4-2.

With his back to the wall, Irfan produced his best snooker, firing breaks of 64 and 53 in the next three frames to complete a stunning 5-4 victory.

The other semi-final was a more controlled affair. Three-time world champion Asif opened with a 105 break against Mubashir Raza and never trailed, sealing a 5-2 win.

Mubashir's only significant response was a 71 break in the third frame, but Asif's consistency proved decisive.—Sports Reporter

Salah returns to Liverpool training after AFCON

LIVERPOOL: Mohamed Salah made his much-anticipated return to Liverpool training on Tuesday following the Africa Cup of Nations as the club prepare to face Olympique de Marseille in the Champions League.

A smiling Salah was put through his paces during a workout with the rest of the squad at the club's training centre on the eve of the match in France.

The return of the Egypt forward has been a major talking point after he took aim at Liverpool in an explosive interview early last month.

Salah accused the club of throwing him "under the bus" after he was benched for three games in a row and said he had no relationship with manager Arne Slot.

But he appeared as a substitute in a 2-0 Premier League win against Brighton and Hove Albion on Dec 13, providing an assist, and Slot subsequently said the club had moved on from the furore.

Last week the Liverpool boss said he welcomed Salah's return, refusing to divulge the content of his conversations with the 33-year-old, whose team finished fourth at the Africa Cup of Nations.

"Even if I had 15 attackers I still would have been happy if he would have come back, but that's not our current situation," the Dutchman said ahead of Saturday's 1-1 draw with struggling Burnley.

Slot also said before the game at Anfield that he was unsure whether the forward would face Marseille on Wednesday.

Liverpool are currently ninth in the league phase of the Champions League.

The top eight qualify automatically for the last 16 while teams placed from ninth to 24th face a playoff round.

Salah is Liverpool's third-highest goalscorer of all time with 250 goals in 421 appearances, winning two Premier League titles and the Champions League since joining from Roma in 2017.

He signed a lucrative new two-year contract last year as he played a starring role in guiding Liverpool to a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title.

But he has been a shadow of his former self during Liverpool's struggles this season, managing just five goals in all competitions.

Liverpool's Premier League defence collapsed with a run of six defeats in seven matches starting in late September.

The club are now unbeaten in 12 games in all competitions but are 14 points behind leaders Arsenal.—AFP